

U.S. defector to Viet Cong is said to want to return

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Washington—A former United States marine who allegedly defected and became a Viet Cong lieutenant has approached a foreigner in Vietnam and sent a message that after more than 13 years he wants to come home.

The State and Defense departments, which withheld details of the case, identified him as Robert Russell Garwood, of Greensburg, Ind., who was a 19-year-old private first class when captured in August, 1965.

When he was given the chance to return with other American captives, he voluntarily stayed behind, officials said. Now the U.S. government has asked the International Red Cross to contact him and help him return.

It was Representative G. V. (Sonny) Montgomery (D., Miss.), the chairman of a House select committee on missing persons in Southeast Asia, who disclosed that intelligence files describe Private Garwood as an active participant with Viet Cong forces.

He cited a report by his committee that said the marine elected to remain with the Viet Cong when offered release in 1967. The man "was observed by American captives and seen to bear arms with the enemy and participate in the interrogation of other American prisoners of war," the congressman said. "Records show he was promoted to lieutenant in the Viet Cong forces.

"Numerous reports from long-range reconnaissance patrols in the period 1968-69 claim that a Caucasian of his general description was killed in firefights with Viet Cong forces. But a more recent report indicates that he could have been alive in Vietnam as late as 1974.

"I have no doubt he's the one," Mr. Montgomery stated.

"Although his rank as a PFC has been frozen, should he return he would be entitled to all back pay and allowances with

interest compounded at 10 per cent annually," the congressman said—making it clear he was unhappy at that prospect.

Mr. Montgomery added that it had been reported that the man even led enemy patrols, and guarded some American prisoners. All of this reportedly took place near the big Marine base at Danang, from which Private Garwood was said to have driven out alone in a jeep into enemy territory.

The congressman said he understood that the Marine Corps twice had tried to change Private Garwood's official status from that of prisoner of war to defector, but the switch had never been made, perhaps because of "the political atmosphere at that time."

He said intelligence information on Private Garwood came in testimony before his committee by Lt. Gen. Vernon Walters, the former deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

The Mississippian recalled that members of his committee had gone to Vietnam and concluded that no more prisoners were being kept. But he explained emphatically, "We never brought up defectors. That was not our job."

He continued at a later news conference, "Let's hope he does come back. He should be put in jail."

The first news of the case came from the State Department, where Hodding Carter 3d, the department spokesman, said the U.S. government had "approached the Vietnamese directly at a high level" and asked that Private Garwood be allowed to leave.

Other State Department officials said Private Garwood slipped a note to a non-American visitor in Hanoi. It said he was assigned to a labor camp outside the city and had decided he wanted to come back to America.

Mr. Carter would not identify the foreigner, but he said that person "had enough information on the person purporting to be Garwood to convince us that it was Garwood."

The Pentagon added little to the State Department report aside from Private Garwood's home town, his date of birth and date of defection.

Another congressman active in the search for Vietnam survivors, Representative Benjamin A. Gilman (D., N.Y.), knew of Private Garwood. He said that "apparently he had been working for the enemy," but he did not offer the details or comment volunteered by Mr. Montgomery.